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## on James Welch

Steven Christenson

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## SIKSIKA FOR TELEMACHUS

### WINTER IN THE BLOOD

By James Welch

Harper and Row, 1974, \$6.95

The central characteristic of art is its ability to synthesize diverse and chaotic materials with unstable forms. *Winter in the Blood* by James Welch not only maintains the form of the novel, already considered dead by a large portion of the literate, but also embodies all the European assumptions that have made the form possible. And Welch has done this in excellent fashion. But the consciousness here is thoroughly native to the plains of the American west and its heritage is remembered in mythologies nearly as old as the Ice Age. The nameless narrator is neither Christian nor warrior, neither baptised nor proven. He remembers the stories his grandmother told about the chief Standing Bear, the man who might have been his grandfather in a better age, who was killed in a hopeless raid for food on the neighboring Gros Ventre. Standing Bear's death echoes the last desperate years of what had once been a thriving Blackfeet culture. The dominant theme throughout the novel is the quest for an authentic geneology and pride in the narrator's ancestry. Then maybe the narrator can consider a name. The search involves winning sympathy from degraded women and the curious trust which develops with the airplane man, a white man, as nameless as the narrator, a fugitive from the F.B.I., as helpless as the accidents that killed the narrator's father and brother and later the magnificent old horse Bird. The synthesis achieved is as genuine as the beauty of the narrative prose. *Winter in the Blood* is a rare, energetic appearance of fictive skills that assures the reader the novel remains, surprisingly, a vital art form.

Bird, the old horse who "had seen most of everything," is as important as any character in the novel. Old Bird is retired, no longer a cow horse, he spends most of his days in the shade of the shed. Bird was there when they find First Raise frozen in the borrow pit and is innocently involved in the accident that killed Mose, the narrator's

only brother. For the next twenty years the narrator's severely injured knee would serve as a grim reminder of the senseless twist of events since the time of Standing Bear that have drained the family of its finest energies. It is like the ducks First Raise had won at the fair and the carelessness that drowned them all save Amos. With disturbing resignation, Teresa, the narrator's mother, says of Amos, "He was lucky. One duck can't be smarter than another. They're like Indians." Obstinate in his old age, Bird is there to take the narrator to Yellow Calf, the mysterious old man who lives alone in a log and mud shack and is blind. The narrator remembers taking food to the old man with First Raise years before. Yellow Calf's only friends are the deer, and they are not happy. "This earth is cockeyed," and men are the last to know. Even if the narrator dismisses Yellow Calf as a bit senile, he promises to return with a bottle of wine, and does so, again with Bird, shortly after the death of a grandmother so ancient she had forgotten how to talk and shortly before Bird, though old, would die as stupidly as all the fine blood had died since the coming of the white man.

"There are no fish in the river," the narrator tells the airplane man when they first meet in the bar in Malta. "Not even a sucker." The airplane disagrees and wants to take the narrator fishing to prove that there are fish in the river, or else buy him the biggest steak in town. The narrator may not be Christian, but his affection for the living, especially the luckless and downtrodden, is rooted in feelings that have inspired great religions to develop around values of trust and love. Later, quite by chance, the two meet in a cafe in Havre, and the narrator offers to help the airplane man escape pursuing F.B.I. agents without the slightest concern for the consequences to himself. It appears incidental. In both cases the narrator was looking for the Cree woman who had run off with his gun and electric razor, and the airplane man's desperate personality makes that appear in turn incidental. When the narrator finally finds the Cree woman at Gable's he tells her he didn't care for the gun, that he couldn't even find a plug for the razor. His reward is her warning, her brother Dougie was looking for him, and within the hour the narrator stumbles out of Gable's with a bloody broken nose only to find the airplane man handcuffed to a shiny suit, the F.B.I., and life is no worse than it was before: "Again I felt the helplessness of being in a world of stalking white men. But those Indians down at Gable's were no bargain either. I was a stranger to both and both had beaten me."

The narrator is innocent and defeated, a nameless inheritor of



neolithic wisdom in the face of a cockeyed world crippled by spiritless machines. One senses the warrior deprived of the opportunity to earn his name by a society established on the plains by a peculiar people from another continent. Many of these are like the airplane man, maybe the most the natives have ever seen of the white man, as defeated and luckless as they are.

One of the admirable qualities of *Winter in the Blood* is the author's persistence not to take the easy way out. We may never know why the narrator slaps Marleen, who had been rather good to him, when all she does is ask him to kiss her pussy. One accustomed to easier fiction might expect this to be a key moment which the narrator fails to measure up to. But knowing what has already happened, it is easy for sensitive readers to forgive this assault on a woman who is no more degraded than he is. Afterall, the assault is itself a sex act, and despite Marleen's protests, she seems to have enjoyed it and asks the narrator to return. Part of the basis that gives *Winter in the Blood* its genuine synthesizing quality is its elimination of positive action as a means to asserting value and personal worth.

The victorious moment in the novel is the intuition that Yellow Calf is the narrator's grandfather. Later, the narrator's raw courage that commands Bird to save the cow from drowning in the mud is met with another typical defeat. All that is permitted the narrator is that rare moment of enlightenment wherein the pride and nobility of his ancestry is revealed. This enlightenment gives *Winter in the Blood* its essential native quality, and the whole moment assimilates a foreign language (English) and a literate art form from western Europe (the novel). The synthesis is so convincing that Lame Bull's ridiculous eulogy of the grandmother in the closing scene is filled with the comic warmth that recalls the day when the Trickster stories ("Old Man" in English, "*Napi*" in Blackfoot—*Siksika*) entertained the narrator's ancestors.

If this is an imaginative reading, which is what fine fiction desires and deserves, then the work must stand up to an evaluation of its language and technique. It would be foolish to find fault with the exciting yet simple language from which Welch composes the fine narrative passages, the heart of fiction and practically all forms of storytelling. Welch has already established himself as a fine poet and may help to prove that poets are making our best fiction writers, that quality fiction cannot be written without the sensitivity to language that mostly poets seem to have. Certainly there is nothing versy about

*Winter in the Blood*, how awful if there was. But everywhere Welch draws upon the same hard, concrete vocabulary from which he drew for the excellent poems of *Riding the Earthboy* 40:

The daughter sat in the backseat with me, a case of peaches separating us. She was a frail girl with skin as white as the man's ears. Her own ears were hidden beneath a flow of black frizzled hair contained by a blue-and-white beaded headband. She lolled back in the corner, sometimes looking at me, sometimes gazing blankly out the window at the unchanging country. At first, her grunts seemed to be in agreement with whatever her parents were talking about, but then she grunted twice during a lull in the conversation. She seemed to be in some kind of discomfort. Her eyes were dull, like those of a sick calf.

Certainly *Winter in the Blood* is not experimental fiction. There is nothing to be found in its technique that is especially innovative. The methods used have been tried, tested, proven. This puts *Winter in the Blood* in a puzzling context and finds itself trying to win an audience at a time when technical innovation does seem to be the fashionable stepping stone to fine fiction. The list of excellent innovators is an impressive one: Gass, Coover, Barthelme, Brautigan, Nabokov, Burroughs, Hawkes, and on. The desperation for new forms of fiction may reflect the spiritual bankruptcy of a contemporary America still shellshocked from involvement in a whole series of ugly, devastating wars and helplessly guilty over the cruel imbalances that plague its society. However the trend is explained, *Winter in the Blood* is rooted in circumstances that neither require nor would benefit from technical innovation. The narrator, still crying the wish of the poet, wants us to believe him, to accept every word as real, to be genuinely moved by the heartbreaking series of events that make the nameless narrator more helpless. Welch is returning to a simpler, more basic form of storytelling, and in so doing aligns himself more consciously to that barely remembered heritage before the white man swept over the plains. And this must be recognized as a technical achievement, the fusion of technique and content, of skills and intention. What is remembered is the story, the beautiful uplifting language, the pride that faces defeat like old Bird who knew the worthlessness of that stupid cow better than anyone.

Steven Christenson